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THE GROWTH OF THE "SERVICE IDEA" IN SELLING

Within recent years there has been developing a noticeable tendency to define selling as a process of rendering service. Thus a manufacturer of automobiles does not sell automobiles; he sells transportation. And he uses as his strongest selling point the argument that the buyer of his car will have uninterrupted transportation. Similarly a manufacturer of tires does not sell tires; he sells mileage. And if one casing does not give satisfactory mileage he will furnish another. The prevalence of the idea is denoted by such slogans as that of the Mazda lamp: "Not the name of a thing but the mark of a service."

Though this tendency has made itself felt and has been remarked upon frequently of late, still it has never been measured and stated in quantitative terms. The writer undertook to measure it, adopting as the unit of measurement the appearance of the word service, as the method to count the number of advertisements in standard magazines—*Literary Digest*, *Collier's Weekly*, and *Country Life in America*—in which the word has appeared.

Admittedly the mere word does not convey all of the idea; nor does every occurrence of the word denote the exclusive and identical idea under measurement. Nevertheless the word is the best sign there is of the idea. Again, magazine advertising does not comprise all the forms of selling. Still it is probably the best repository extant of selling practices and policies; and it reflects the prevailing trends with considerable accuracy.

A preliminary survey of the advertisements in these periodicals beginning with the year 1900 showed that the word occurred in from one to five advertisements in a hundred, until in 1908 when it began to appear more frequently. Accordingly this year was taken as the initial year for the survey, and issues were examined at intervals of two years. In the case of the monthly, *Country Life*, each issue in the year was examined; in the case of the weekly magazines, one issue was chosen at random from those of each month. All the advertisements were counted and read except those on cover pages and in classified columns; and the percentage of those containing the

word "service" was computed. The results are shown in Table I of which the following may be taken as a summary:

TABLE I

SHOWING THE NUMBER OF ADVERTISEMENTS CONTAINING THE WORD "SERVICE,"
IN THE *Literary Digest*, *Collier's Weekly*, AND *Country Life in America*,
1908-20

| | <i>Literary Digest</i> | | | <i>Collier's Weekly</i> | | | <i>Country Life</i> | | | AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF "ADS" CONTAIN- ING "SERVICE" |
|---------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|--|
| | No. of "Ads" | No. with "Serv- ice" | Percent- age | No. of "Ads" | No. with "Serv- ice" | Percent- age | No. of "Ads" | No. with "Serv- ice" | Percent- age | |
| 1908... | 161 | 11 | 6.8 | 265 | 19 | 7.1 | 101 | 1 | 1.0 | 4.9 |
| 1910... | 294 | 36 | 12.2 | 502 | 30 | 5.9 | 143 | 4 | 2.8 | 6.9 |
| 1912... | 314 | 49 | 15.6 | 490 | 59 | 12.0 | 133 | 18 | 13.5 | 13.7 |
| 1914... | 390 | 64 | 16.1 | 317 | 61 | 19.2 | 157 | 20 | 12.1 | 15.8 |
| 1916... | 617 | 113 | 18.3 | 419 | 81 | 19.3 | 177 | 28 | 15.8 | 17.8 |
| 1918... | 609 | 184 | 30.2 | 333 | 83 | 24.9 | 144 | 21 | 14.6 | 23.2 |
| 1920... | 1,130 | 298 | 26.3 | 288 | 86 | 29.9 | 132 | 22 | 16.6 | 24.2 |

1. Since 1908 there has been a growing tendency to use the word service in magazine advertising. In all three of the magazines examined the trend is similar in direction and amount.

2. The frequency has increased on the average from 5 per cent to 24 per cent—almost fivefold.

3. The rate of increase has been fairly regular, the greatest amount occurring in the biennium 1911-12.

We should probably not be justified in regarding this change as a matter of conscious evolution. During the first part of the period under investigation it was probably unrecognized by any considerable body of sellers. Within more recent years, however, it has probably been more acutely conscious and purposeful. A strong influence in making it so may have been the rise of the Rotary clubs and the adoption in 1912 of Service as their motto.

Again we are not justified in assuming that this redefinition of selling is completed. The new conception does not yet permeate the

entire selling consciousness, as is shown by the fact that even now only 24 per cent of advertisements contain the word. This does not necessarily mean that twenty-four of every hundred advertisers are converted, for some of the advertisements are duplications from year to year of the advertisements of the same firms. On the other hand, the figures do not mean that only 24 per cent of sellers have the new conception. Many may conceivably hold it with greater or less clearness without expressing it in their advertising.

In connection with the evolution of the term should be noted one curious qualitative change that has occurred. As first used, the word service denoted something gratuitous which was given in addition to the commodity, such as restroom and telephone accommodations in a department store. Service was regarded as a sort of economic second-mile which the seller furnished out of the goodness of his heart. Within recent years, however, and by the advanced sellers, service has come to be regarded not as an accessory but as a real part of the commodity, indeed, as the commodity itself. As both seller and buyer have begun to philosophize about the matter they have come to see that after all the latter pays for the service. He therefore has the right to specify what form it shall take.

Judging by the fivefold increase in the use of "service" during the past twelve years, we may reasonably infer that sellers have found it a profitable idea to exploit, and that the seller who wishes to be successful will probably profit by using the idea in distributing his wares. He may weave his sales arguments and appeals around it; or in a more subtle manner he may coin a new term that will make his commodity stand for some particular form of service. What is still more to the point, he must saturate himself with the idea, concentrating earnestly upon the needs of the buyer and seeking honestly to fulfil them. In other words, he must make service not a matter of rote acquiescence but a matter of hearty anticipation.

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